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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8774
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE PRIORITY 4654
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2017

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS III #31: ESTRELLA LEAVES PRSC,
PARTY DOESN'T CARE

Classified By: Economic-Political Counselor Michael A. Meigs, Reasons 1
.4(b), (d)

¶1. (U) This is the 31st cable in our series on Dominican
politics in the 3rd year of the administration of President
Leonel Fernandez.

ESTRELLA LEAVES PRSC, PARTY DOESN'T CARE
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¶2. (SBU) Eduardo Estrella, 2004 presidential candidate for
the third-ranked Social Christian Reform Party (PRSC or
"Reformistas") and the second place finisher in the
fraud-wracked 2008 PRSC presidential primary, suggested in a
July 13 meeting with Charge Bullen and poloff that he had for
all intents and purposes left the PRSC. Estrella said his
mission now is to launch an independent movement that
stresses both morality and political activism - both themes
of his unsuccessful primary campaign. The unstated
motivation for leaving was his inability to inspire loyalty
within the party leadership, combined with his personal
distaste for PRSC presidential nominee Amable Aristy Castro.
Estrella had slid from prominence over the last several years
and there is no evidence to suggest that his departure will
split the Party.

-- Early Biography

¶3. (U) Estrella was born June 5, 1953, to Army Major
Guarionex Estrella Sadhala and Mabel Elisa Virella, one of
five siblings. In 1961, when Estrella was 8 years old, his
father was arrested and tortured under suspicion of
complicity in the assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo.
Estrella describes this as the formative event of his youth.

¶4. (U) Estrella was politicized early and has described
himself as a "Reformista at birth, from childhood, by virtue
of my family." He began his political career at age 19, when
Balaguer appointed him as a Second Secretary in the Dominican
Embassy in Mexico (Estrella was simultaneously undertaking
civil engineering studies at the National Autonomous
University (UNAM)). Estrella established a personal
relationship with Balaguer after inviting Balaguer to his
1977 wedding to Arelis Cruz.

¶5. (U) After a failed attempt to win the mayor's office in
Santiago in 1985, Estrella rose quickly through the
Reformista ranks. He appeared as a personal favorite of
Balaguer, as indicated by a series of increasingly important
positions during the second Balaguer administration,

including Undersecretary of Public Works (1986-90), Director of the National Institute for Potable Water and Sewage Treatment (1990-91), and Secretary of State for Public Works (1991-94). He was hand-picked by Balaguer to stand for the Senate seat for the Province of Santiago in 1998, which he won. Opposition political figures speak favorably of his time in the Senate, describing him as a "mediator." He was ultimately appointed to the Party's Executive Committee.

¶6. (U) Estrella remains married to Arelis Cruz and has two daughters, Paula and Mabel.

-- Slide From Power: 2000-2006

¶7. (C) Recently, Luis Toral (protect), a senior party figure and ex-Balaguer official, suggested that Estrella's slide from power began when he failed to help engineer a "come-back" victory for former President Joaquin Balaguer in the 2000 general election. Though Toral was Balaguer's campaign manager and Estrella simply a member of the Party's Executive Committee, Toral insists that Balaguer branded Estrella a "fallen star" after the PRSC polled less than 25 percent in that election.

¶8. (SBU) While only Toral knows if this quote is a bit of revisionist history, it would not be incorrect at least to link Balaguer's election defeat with the beginning of Estrella's slide from party prominence. Balaguer was Estrella's mentor and champion for the entirety of Estrella's political career. With the 2000 elections showing Balaguer to be politically unviable, that taint undoubtedly impacted those he most closely embraced. With Balaguer's death in 2002, what little direct support Balaguer could still muster died with him.

¶9. (SBU) Figurative proximity with Balaguer finally proved damaging to Estrella in 2004, when Estrella himself stood in the presidential election. At the time, Estrella still closely identified with Balaguer, referring to him frequently in campaign speeches and interviews, but popular support for Balaguerism had waned. Estrella received less than 9 percent of the vote in the general election.

¶10. (SBU) Estrella's inability to deliver the election took its toll on his reputation within the Party, but Estrella was dealt yet another blow soon after. He was one of the few party leaders to speak out adamantly against the Red (PRSC) - White (Dominican Revolutionary Party) alliance for the 2006 congressional and municipal Elections. Though Estrella may have been right to oppose the alliance - the PRSC lost 14 seats in the House of Representatives that year - his near solo stand further isolated him from the PRSC leadership cadre that included soon-to-be arch-rival Amable Aristy Castro.

-- Precipice: 2007

¶11. (SBU) The final blow to Estrella came just this past June, when the PRSC presidential primary appeared rigged in favor of Aristy Castro. While some polls leading into the primary voting showed Estrella leading Aristy, Aristy defeated him by a margin of nearly 14 percent. In describing the primary, leading Dominican civil rights NGO Citizen Participation (PC) declared it to be "characterized by intense political patronage and vote purchasing." PC further noted the distribution of cash payments at primary voting centers and obvious voting irregularities in Higuey, Aristy's stronghold. In one location, statistics suggest that "voting" must have occurred at the rate of 1 person ever 12 seconds - an impossibility. That same location showed 99.6 percent of all votes cast for Aristy and just 0.16 percent cast for Estrella. Although Estrella complained bitterly both publicly and privately to party leadership, the PRSC affirmed the primary to be valid and binding.

Separation

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¶12. (C) "I don't want an alliance with people who throw money out of helicopters." With that statement to Charg Bullen on June 13, Estrella simultaneously damned PRSC presidential candidate Aristy and suggested that he himself could no longer remain within the party. The statement might appear figurative, dealing with the cash payments for voting, but is, in fact, literal. It applies directly to Aristy, who admitted to this practice to the director of the daily newspaper El Nacional: "I sometimes, because supporters are so close to me, throw it to them. Yes, I can't say it's not true."

¶13. (C) Estrella has told PRSC President Enrique Antun and Secretary General Victor Gomez Casanova of his

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dissatisfaction and of his plans to begin a new campaign stressing morality and activism. Estrella says they appeared disinterested. When Estrella informed Embassy officials of the same, he stressed that the plan was not political in nature.

Comment

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¶14. (C) Embassy anticipates what little support exists for Estrella's efforts will not translate into political capital and Estrella will be unable to sustain any efforts towards an independent presidential candidacy in 2008. The overwhelming majority of Dominicans are tied into and a political patronage system that rewards members of dominant political parties. Objective platforms and moral imperatives have little to do with what President Fernandez termed, disparagingly, this past weekend the &particracia8 of the Dominican Republic.

-- Drafted by Michael Garuckis

¶15. (U) This report and extensive other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/>
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